

Challenging Euro-Centrism: From Mendelssohn and Quijano

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I have adhered to the Honor Code for this assignment. - *Satoru Uchida*

Quijano started his essay about coloniality with this phrase: “With the conquest of the societies and the cultures which inhabit what today is called Latin America, began the constitution of a new world order...”¹ It provides readers with the sense of what is behind the coloniality, the long-term effect of being colonized. The Western idea of modern rationality, produced by Europeans through colonization and racism, is the root of coloniality.²

Mendelssohn, a Jewish thinker from late 18th century Germany, wrote insightful analyses of Europeans who were connecting Christianity and the nation and looked for a place for Judaism and Jewish people. His criticism of the Church’s authority³ and his claim that Judaism as a highly tolerant religion⁴ made a significant impact on both Jewish thoughts and European thoughts. Both thinkers appear similarly in some way. First, both of them are confronted with dominating power but attempt to establish their position without violence.⁵ In addition, the power they tackled was from Europe, or Europe itself. Nevertheless, they are not from the exact same context. Mendelssohn is from 18th-century Europe and provided insights about the relationship between religion and state, while Quijano is from the late 20th century and mainly focuses on the legacies of colonization. Because of those differences, it is not easy to compare those two thinkers precisely. However, as I showed above, two thinkers are working on very similar power produced by Europe. Today, it has been almost 70 years since the Asian-African Conference was held in Indonesia, defining the “Third World,” and in terms of economics, education, military, or other dimensions, the Euro-centric world is losing its presence in global society, which Quijano and Mendelssohn could not know. I would like to fabricate a refined idea based on Quijano and

¹ Quijano, Aníbal. "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality." *In Globalization and the Decolonial Option*, (Routledge, 2010), 22.

² Quijano, 25-26.

³ Mendelssohn, Moses, et al. *Jerusalem, Or, on Religious Power and Judaism*, (University Press of New England for Brandeis University Press, 1983), 77-78.

⁴ Mendelssohn, 130.

⁵ Mendelssohn, 85. Quijano never mentioned liberation by force.

Mendelssohn and the declining Euro-centric world. Quijano and Mendelssohn stuck to differentiating themselves from European thought and found something original to themselves or at least a non-European way of thinking. I do not agree with it necessarily because one good strategy for minorities or the oppressed is to stand on the shoulder of the giant. Today, it is obvious that Europe is failing, but it is not contradictory to the fact that Europe developed and built useful tools for humanity. Thus, it is not about how to differentiate themselves from Europe but how to utilize whatever things are available and how to take the initiative in the coming new world order. To reveal why the two thinkers' attempts were not enough today, I will first focus on Mendelssohn and then Quijano, focusing on how the European world justified itself by imposing its power against the non-European world.

Mendelssohn shared his conceptual ideas of religious tolerance and Judaism, in need to claim and defend their religious and civil rights within Christian society.⁶ His argument is based on a clear distinction between Jewish as a group of people and Judaism as a religion that shares the same God as Christianity.⁷ Interestingly, though, he did not make a clear distinction between Christian people and Christianity as a religion. It is shown in his perspective towards Churches and Christian influences over the society. For Mendelssohn, there is no group of people as Christians nor Christianity as a religion. I assume it is because it was part of daily life for the majority of people living in Christian nations. It might be an intentional decision to emphasize the role of Jews in Christian society by showing how Jews are valuable to Christian society to add more complexity. It was a time when Enlightenment was rooted in Christian society, and some people from a Christian background thought Judaism was not capable of being enlightened.⁸ Mendelssohn revealed his thoughts on why Judaism is valuable for further

⁶ Mendelssohn, 130-134.

⁷ Mendelssohn, 87.

⁸ Mendelssohn, 84-85, 90.

enlightenment process instead of fighting against the Christian-based enlightenment framework.⁹ Mendelssohn also distinguished Jews from Judaism. He claimed Judaism is revealed legislation, and Jews are considered to be the group of people that were chosen to preserve monotheism.¹⁰ His argument in Jerusalem was aimed at preventing theorizing prejudice against Judaism and Jews. He was working to secure the place for Jewish people among European Christian nations, and his work contributed to minimizing total assimilation or expel against Jews.

About two centuries later, Quijano argued that former European colonies, despite many such areas being now independent states, are not fully independent. He called it coloniality, with special attention to racism and Euro-centrism. He insisted racism and Euro-centrism complement and reinforce each other, systematically strengthening control over the non-European world, especially their former colonies.¹¹ Racism, in his view, is what produces the coloniality of power. The concept of race was invented to make a border between the colonizer as superior and the colonized as inferior. The concept comes with biological and structural thoughts that justify colonization, reduce social and cultural characteristics, and maintain the hierarchical relationship with former colonies. Racism existed before the era of colonialism, but it is still a problem because racism is deeply rooted after the independence as independent states.¹² Euro-centrism is another place where he sees coloniality over culture. In his theory, Euro-centrism established a political or economic hierarchy, but its notion of superiority soon led to a hierarchical worldview that Europe is superior to the rest of the world in the material or societal, external world, and the spiritual, inner world. Encounters with Indigenous people through the process of colonization intensified this belief, and in the worst case, Indigenous

⁹ Mendelssohn, 87.

¹⁰ Mendelssohn, 119.

¹¹ Quijano, 22-23.

¹² Quijano, 25.

culture was eradicated, which happened in Latin America. The belief of Euro-centrism still dominates the global society in both material and spiritual aspects, resulting in the colonality of culture. Sometimes, Indigenous culture is depicted as immature or exotic because of its difference from Western culture.¹³ Modern science is founded on European ways of thinking, and it was violently applied in most human knowledge regardless of cultural background, without considering the possible error in its way of knowledge production.¹⁴ His goal is to overcome and achieve true liberation.¹⁵

Both of them challenged what emerged in Europe: Christian nation for Mendelssohn and colonality for Quijano. Both of them focused on historical context, suffered from prejudices, and were passionate about removing injustice for minorities and the vulnerable. Mendelssohn took two strategies: 1) separate Jews and Judaism, and 2) Compare Judaism to Christianity and show it is not inferior to Christianity at all. The first one is necessary for him considering the historical context. Jews at that time had to live within the Christian nations, which held strong anti-Semitic sentiments for a long time. To deal with this harsh situation, he carried out a second strategy. He decided to use enlightenment, which is the product of the Christian world, to prove that Judaism has any inferiority to Christianity, and even Judaism has some implications for enlightenment.

Quijano, on the contrary, is living in an independent state. However, he needs to challenge Euro-centrism to remove the colonality of power and culture. Yet, he lacks one thing that Mendelssohn heavily relies on. As he said, colonizers eradicated Indigenous culture, which implies there is little known history and traditions of their own. Quijano thus focused on another factor of Euro-centrism, namely racism and rationality. The role of racism in his theory is close

¹³ Quijano, 24.

¹⁴ Quijano, 26-28.

¹⁵ Ironically, the Catholic Church around this time, affected by liberation theology, began to develop liberation theology. One of the main supporters of liberation theology is Pope Francis. McFarland, Ian Alexander, David A. S. Fergusson, Karen Kilby, and Iain R. Torrance. *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 279-280.

to Christianity in Mendelssohn. Racism differentiates minorities from majorities and justifies discrimination and unjust treatment. He insists modern knowledge is based on subject-object reasoning, and it provides theoretical support for racism. It let Europeans see people not thinking in the same manner as illiterate or immature. Quijano recognized this structure; thus, he differentiated European thought and European imperialism within Euro-centrism. Two thinkers took slightly different approaches against almost identical figures. I would not be persuaded by either of them, however, because I know more history than those two when they constructed their theories. Neither Mendelssohn nor Quijano succeeded in producing something different from dominating Euro-centrism, although both of them were on the path to leaving the Euro-centric world.

Mendelssohn and Quijano challenged Euro-centrism and its hegemony in the world when the fall of the Euro-American hegemony was not obvious. Today, what international society is experiencing is the United States removing its military force from where it once intervened, Russia being unable to help its allies, and European countries, including those “developed” countries, suffering from political polarization. It is not enough to be free from Euro-centrism. The rest of the world needs to establish something to take the role of the European order. Yet there is a risk of reproducing the negative side of Euro-centrism, such as forced assimilation or coloniality. This is why I believe that those who experienced oppression from the majority should create a new tradition. Mendelssohn focused on legislative aspects of Judaism instead of apocalyptic teachings. He also argued about the effect of characters on human thought.¹⁶ Quijano revealed that national independence is not liberation because it is still defined by European ideas and traditions. He did not forget to share that he is not replicating racism by strictly differentiating and treating former colonizers and colonized in different ways. He also briefly

¹⁶ Mendelssohn, 118-120.

mentioned that he does not intend to revive what is believed to be Indigenous culture in modern times.¹⁷ Both thinkers never denied the majority's culture and tradition. We need to learn this kind of respect when adjusting to the new world order, which is very similar to the European idea of tolerance.

¹⁷ Quijano, 24; Quijano, 32.

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